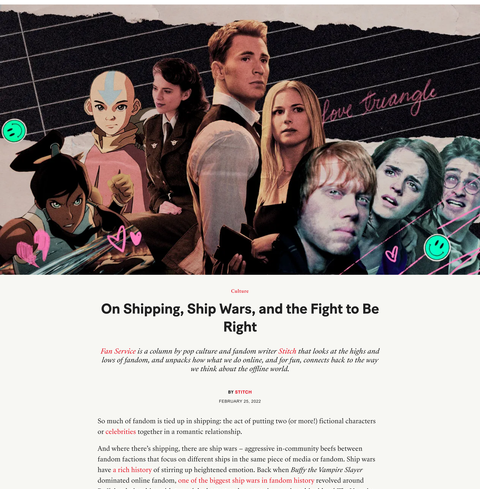

Culture

On Shipping, Ship Wars, and the Fight to Be Right

Fan Service is a column by pop culture and fandom writer Stitch that looks at the highs and lows of fandom, and unpacks how what we do online, and for fun, connects back to the way we think about the offline world.

BY STITCH
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So much of fandom is tied up in shipping: the act of putting two (or more!) fictional characters or celebrities together in a romantic relationship.

And where there's shipping, there are ship wars – aggressive in-community beefs between fandom factions that focus on different ships in the same piece of media or fandom. Ship wars have a rich history of stirring up heightened emotion. Back when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* dominated online fandom, one of the biggest ship wars in fandom history revolved around Buffy's relationships with two of the hottest and most toxic vampires this side of *The Vampire Diaries*'s extended universe: Spike and Angel. Over the past 30 years, we've seen a number of examples:

- Harry/Hermione and Harry/Ginny fans fought early on in the *Harry Potter* fandom, with their aggression amping up once the latter pairing became canon in the books
- Fans of the *1997 TRPG Final Fantasy VII argued over whether to ship* main character Cloud with Aerith or Tifa
- Inuyasha fans in the early 2000s fought over whether Inuyasha should be with Kagome or his long-lost love Kikyo
- Team Edward vs Team Jacob reigned in the late 2000s and early 2010s, and was treated as a marketing move, which heightened fandom in-fighting
- Elena Gilbert was torn between the toxic and thirst-inspiring Salvatore brothers on *The Vampire Diaries*, and fans fought endlessly over the two pairings
- Back in the '90s, Mulder/Scully shippers in the *X-Files* fandom were at war with... everyone else, actually

While fandoms have always been prone to intense, sometimes aggressive responses to things like criticism or character changes, more widespread use of social media — especially on unmoderated and harassment-happy platforms like Twitter and Tumblr — led to an increase in bad behavior.

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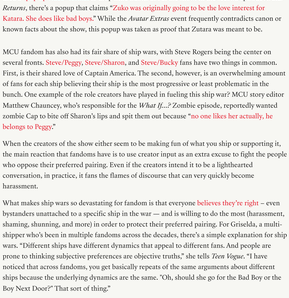

As Claire McBride notes in "The Fall of Fandom Etiquette and the rise of the ship war," "What was once the love of two characters' dynamic has become, to a small but outspoken subsection of fans, a zero-sum game. How did we get from "God, I love seeing these two together" to "These two need to be together, so help me God?"

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When *Avatar the Last Airbender* was on air, it was the source of one of the biggest ship wars between 2005 and 2008, so much so that it continues to this day on some parts of the internet. Fans fought over whether waterbender Katara would or even *should* end up with the Avatar, airbender Aang,... or the (initially) unfriendly hottie firebender Zuko. Before the creators really got involved, fans were split. People who shipped Katara with Aang loved the soft childhood romance, but side-eyed Zuko because of his complicity in the Fire Nation's century of imperialism. People who shipped her with Zuko loved the "enemies to friends to lovers" aspect of the relationship once Zuko joined up with the Gaang in its second season. Those same fans, however, viewed the relationship between Katara and Aang as boring or even babyish.

Avatar fandom was doing fine on its own with back-and-forth ship wars and accusations of everything from hating positive/"unproblematic" ships to being pro-imperialism depending on what you chose. However, even though ship wars are primarily started by fans reading into interactions between characters or interviews with celebrities, sometimes ship wars get their fuel from creators. Take this clip from a 2008 San Diego Comic-Con panel where the creators for *Avatar* went a little overboard in dunking on the ships – spending extra time on making fun of Zuko/Katara shippers, unfortunately. Then there's the *Avatar Extras* event, a marathon that used a "pop up video" format to drop little tidbits about the show. In the second episode *Avatar Returns*, there's a popup that claims "Zuko was originally going to be the love interest for Katara. She does like bad boys." While the *Avatar Extras* event frequently contradicts canon or known facts about the show, this popup was taken as proof that Zutara was meant to be.

MCU fandom has also had its fair share of ship wars, with Steve Rogers being the center on several fronts. Steve/Peggy, Steve/Sharon, and Steve/Bucky fans have two things in common. First, is their shared love of Captain America. The second, however, is an overwhelming amount of fans for each ship believing their ship is the most progressive or least problematic in the bunch. One example of the role creators have played in fueling this ship war? MCU story editor Matthew Chauncey, who's responsible for the *What If...?* Zombie episode, reportedly wanted zombie Cap to bite off Sharon's lips and spit them out because "no one likes her actually, he belongs to Peggy."

When the creators of the show either seem to be making fun of what you ship or supporting it, the main reaction that fandoms have is to use creator input as an extra excuse to fight the people who oppose their preferred pairing. Even if the creators intend it to be a lighthearted conversation, in practice, it fans the flames of discourse that can very quickly become harassment.

What makes ship wars so devastating for fandom is that everyone believes they're right – even bystanders unattached to a specific ship in the war — and is willing to do the most (harassment, shaming, shunning, and more) in order to protect their preferred pairing. For Griselda, a multi-shipper who's been in multiple fandoms across the decades, there's a simple explanation for ship wars. "Different ships have different dynamics that appeal to different fans. And people are prone to thinking subjective preferences are objective truths," she tells *Teen Vogue*. "I have noticed that across fandoms, you get basically repeats of the same arguments about different ships because the underlying dynamics are the same. 'Oh, should she go for the Bad Boy or the Boy Next Door?' That sort of thing."

Many ship wars are about pairings revolving around different character archetypes, and they go beyond letting people like or dislike things. They take a reasonable divide – people in fandoms often naturally have interest in different ships and form communities of love around "their" pairings of choice – and bass boost the scenarios to where shipping or not shipping a pairing is equivalent to committing a crime or being a puritan.

"I've been a part of several ship wars — never an active participant, really, just a member of ships that are fought over — and I think it all comes down to wanting to feel *right*. Fandom, especially fanfic, is all about participating in and *taking ownership* of the material," Colleen, a pop culture nerd and scholar who made it through the Voltron fandom, shares with *Teen Vogue*. "Ship wars are caused by people wanting *their* ship to be the #1 correct ship, the only one, and even if it's not canon it's The One. So you see things like Katsuki no Zutara, where on the one hand you have people arguing their ship is better because it's canon and it's sweet, and on the other hand arguing for tension and character development. In that case it's a matter of preference, and power. Each ship/fandom wants to be in charge."

Shipping-oriented fandom is all about transformation. For many shippers, the pairings we put together in fandom or that come together in a series or on a gossip site are the first time many of us get to see ourselves and relationships that echo the ones we have. Whether it's queer ships as a gateway to understanding your own identity or fans of color highlighting ships that center characters of color, the goal of shipping has been to fill gaps and provide room for fans to play with emotional connections.

Wanting to defend your favorite ship – or even complaining about a ship you dislike – shouldn't ever get to a point where, as one long-time *Buffy* fan brings up from their past, people are encouraging doxxing and involving law enforcement. Shipping is fun, and criticism in and of fandom can make the experience of fandom better... and no one should ever actually try to hurt other people over shipping. A ship simply isn't worth that.

Stitch will continue discussing the many layers of fandom in Fan Service, published every other week on Teen Vogue. You can follow their work on Stitch's Media Mix and on Twitter.

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